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Evicting Amsterdam

Preliminary Report on the eviction of ADM community and their tangible and intangible heritage

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Author's bio

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Evicting Amsterdam: Report on the eviction of ADM community and their tangible and intangible heritage

The Background

As was mentioned in the previous report concerning the eviction of ADM (Dalakoglou 2018), the ADM community is one of the last examples of the vanishing socio-cultural minority of Amsterdam squatters and their unique and endangered free-spaces (vrijplaats), DIY culture and material culture. The general cultural and artistic production of the squatter communities has been a determinant for the identity, history and character of the entire city between the 1960s and 2010. The political, social and cultural contribution of squatters to the life and the history of Amsterdam cannot be stressed enough, however, since 2010 when squatting was criminalised by the Dutch authorities several police campaigns have systematically persecuted the community and its practices and the size of the group has decreased enormously. Despite all this it is not yet extinct completely and even continues to grow within specific enclaves in spite of the institutional obstacles.

Since my 2018 report unfortunately ADM has been evicted after 21 years in place. The process was presented as a simple juridical procedure, yet given the historical and urban framework within which it happened, it is arguably part of the political and corporate efforts to gentrify the city and separate Amsterdam's population into desirable and undesirable residents.

Briefly, I wish to remind you that the ADM community squatted an abandoned shipyard in 1997 in the industrial area of Amsterdam West Port. According to my ongoing ethnographic study in Amsterdam, the ADM community contributed enormously and represented one of the best examples of the (now destroyed in the case of ADM) tangible and intangible heritage of

Amsterdam squatter communities. Briefly one can outline that this heritage includes sets of cultural and material skills and knowledge, everyday living practices, worldviews, cultural codes, perceptions of the world, the city and the environment - to mention a few dimensions - that do not follow the mainstream and majoritarian cultural systems of reference. Within the context of their DIY and non-profit cultural principles, ADM and the squatters' community enrich the life of the fast changing and increasingly commercialised city. In support of the argument about the rapid and ongoing gentrification of Amsterdam, it is perhaps enough to mention that the cost of housing in Amsterdam over the last 5 years has increased by 63,3%. Thus it is safe to assume that entire low-income groups have been and continue to be priced out of the city¹.

Following their principles, ADMers occupied the abandoned and derelict grounds of the shipyard and over the last 21 years planted a forest, made tiny-houses with their own hands out of natural or reclaimed materials and created what we could call today an economic culture of circular and solidarity/social economy with almost certainly a negative carbon footprint (they hardly produced any waste and in fact reclaimed and reused waste materials as part of their artistic [e.g. art installations] and everyday practices [e.g. house building]) They created food gardens, used the abandoned workshop of the shipyard to create original art, mostly outside the profit-oriented art system, they ran small businesses, organized several festivals each year and weekly performances, they shared daily communal meals and they shared a common socio-cultural perception of the world, with their cultural production and creativity being disseminated in the entire city. ADM over its 21 years became a hub and point of reference for alternative and counter-cultural artistic and DIY creativity for the entire city with evident influence all over Europe. It is perhaps important to mention that all this creativity and cultural production was carried out with no claim of public or private funds using facilities and resources – that were abandoned for decades by the owners — which went through a material metamorphosis

¹ 'Amsterdam heeft minst betaalbare huizen ter wereld' Available in https://www.at5.nl/artikelen/191207/amsterdam-heeft-minst-betaalbare-huizen-ter-wereld?fbclid=IwAR1HWC8q96adg12LCH7Msp_axtsKpmV6BgpHeau-fIZLAc-TcRKjMUD1pkc

informed by the community's unique and alternative to the mainstream worldviews, via the community's everyday practices, skills and knowledge.

The eviction and the new location

The events surrounding the eviction in January 2019 were dramatic on many different levels. Despite the agreements between the community and the authorities to the opposite, the ADM community was not given the time to remove their belongings and the large and heavy art installations which were swiftly destroyed by bulldozers. Police physically and literally kicked out the 125 residents of ADM from their homes and bulldozers entered immediately destroying the thousands of trees that ADMers had planted, demolished homes and gardens, workshops and facilities and destroyed dozens of large artistic installations that involved years of work and had iconic value for the community and in several cases for the entire city. Thus, in January 2019 during the eviction we witnessed the destruction of part of the most important tangible heritage of Amsterdam's counter-cultural living history and ADM's - as a distinct community of that history.

In a dramatic effort to protest the forthcoming eviction and to stress the destructive force that was coming to demolish the heritage of the squatters' community and of our city, on December 2018, one of ADM's and Amsterdam's most iconic artistic installations: the wooden phoenix of ADM was set alight and was burned by the sculptor along with the ADM community and hundreds of ADM's supporters.

Meanwhile, as my ethnographic work's initial evidence suggest, the grounds offered as an alternative relocation place (and only for 2 years) can hardly be described as appropriate for human habitation. Certainly, the new location of sludge-fields is not a place the community could possibly keep their distinct material and intangible culture that comprise their identity and help to maintain their daily relationships and activities that binds the community together. It is not a place where they can rebuild a life informed by their shared cultural and social cosmology maintaining their everyday life's practices and lifestyle in any way similar to the one they had in

their previous location. Setting aside the evident environmental hazard that the sludge-field poses to the health and wellbeing of the members of the community, the entire relocation ignores completely the distinct culture and lifestyle of the group and the cultural logics that they represent. For example, ADMers in the new location are banned from running their small businesses or organising and performing their iconic festivals. These are the central rituals around which the community works collectively for the entire year, these actions and events celebrate their communal unity and provide necessary art and performances for the many thousands of visitors who attend each year, free of charge. Moreover, as I described in my previous report the process of spontaneous and collaborative 21-year-old place-making that is a crucial part of ADM-DIY culture cannot be replicated automatically and instantly, especially in an inappropriate location.

The ADM community, like any other community, needs to share collective feelings of human security and safety and their culture must be safeguarded in order for Amsterdam not to lose one of its very last samples of the very unique squatters DIY subculture and its own living urban heritage, which appeared and grew since the 1960s and since 2010 is under explicit threat. In January 2019, during the eviction, ADM was stripped of some of the most crucial elements of its cultural materiality. For now the human agents of this culture remain traumatized but physically healthy. As such if they are provided with the right to exist and to re-materialise as a collective their shared knowledge, skills and practices still exist. In other words, if given the opportunity by authorities, as long as the collective intelligence and the intangible elements of their culture exist, there is hope that they will be able to rebuild new forms of their material culture and slowly repair their collective trauma.

What is intangible heritage?

Hence, below I need to explain the concept of intangible heritage as this is what was salvaged after the destruction of the unique material culture of ADM and the tangible heritage of the city and it is the only hope to avoid the extinction of the social minority of Amsterdam free-spacers.

Although within humanities and social sciences the term “culture” has been analysed extensively and has been crucial for the development of entire disciplines (e.g. see cultural anthropology, cultural studies, material culture studies, cultural geography etc.) When it comes into legal and institutional dimensions there is a different set of complications². Within such frameworks it is necessary to develop operational definitions of huge complex phenomena such as culture. So acknowledging any potential limitations of a brief and operational definition of a multiple and diverse phenomenon that takes place across a huge geographic and historical scale the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity defines culture as “[T]he set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.”³

Again, for operational purposes heritage is divided between tangible (material culture) intangible elements. Arguably, the latter has been often a relatively neglected dimension of culture and only recently has it been added within institutional and legal contexts that focus on safeguarding cultural heritage.⁴

The Article 2(1) of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (“2003 ICH Convention”) provides the following definition for “intangible culture”:

² Sara Ross, York University, Osgoode Hall Law School. *Western Journal of Legal Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 1 “Creating Law, Improving Law”, Article 5, January 2017, titled: “Protecting Urban Spaces of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Nighttime Community Subcultural Wealth: A Comparison of International and National Strategies, The Agent of Change Principle, and Creative Placekeeping”. [Ross]; Wim Van Zanten, “Constructing New Terminology for Intangible Cultural Heritage” (2004) 56:1-2 *Museum International* 36 at 37.

³ Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, GA Res 25, UNESCOR, 31st Sess, Supp No 1, UN Doc 31C/25 (2001) 61 at 62 (adopted on 2 November 2001).

⁴ Ross, *supra*; Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, UNESCO, 2001 at 30. See also, Dawson Munjeri, “Tangible and Intangible Heritage: From Difference to Convergence” (2001) 56:1-2 *Museum International* 12 at 13. Also, cf e.g. Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 16 November 1972, 1037 UNTS 151 (entered into force 17 December 1975); UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003, 2368 UNTS 3 (entered into force 20 April 2006) [2003 ICH Convention]; Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance (adopted 16 November 1995 by UNESCO, 28th Mtg (1995). For an explanation of the history leading up to the development of an international framework for protecting intangible cultural heritage, see Richard Kurin, “Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: A Critical Appraisal” (2004) 56:1-2 *Museum International* 66 at 67-69 [Kurin, “A Critical Appraisal”].

“[T]he practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”

The 2003 ICH Convention also explains in Article 2(2) that intangible cultural heritage “is manifested *inter alia* in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship.” Article 2(3) goes on to specify that “safeguarding” signifies “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Through the violent eviction of squatters, the local authorities in Amsterdam’s recent history are suppressing social minorities who are not considered culturally and socially mainstream. In so doing they are also destroying the city’s tangible and intangible heritage. These same authorities appear to consider the city’s value in purely economic and monetary terms. Concessions are made to property developers and speculators and more and more public housing is privatised and commodified. This is a short-sited approach to gain – even monetary gain. Gains for cities come from maintaining their living cultural heritage. Protection of intangible cultural heritage certainly benefits those individuals who are directly associated with, and derive meaning from, the specific subculture or culture, however, it is not limited to these groups, it also simultaneously promotes dominant iterations of value (e.g., monetary value) for the benefit of the whole city.

For example, from the municipality's perspective, the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage can help ensure that the city remains, or becomes, a place where people want to live or visit. Placing a priority on real estate prices when considering city redevelopment often leads to diminishing returns when the policies neglect what initially attracted people to a location or a city in the first place.⁵

While individual property owners can have their opinions, municipal authorities *ought to*, given their public mandate, place a greater emphasis on non-dominant value sources when they make decisions. This is a viable means of simultaneously promoting and protecting the economic and cultural vitality of the municipality.⁶

Three requisite elements of intangible cultural heritage as it is applied internationally are the following: "[A] manifestation of such heritage (objective component), a community of people (subjective or social component) and a cultural space (spatial component)."⁷ Given the tragic damage in the material culture and the tangible heritage of ADM and the squatter's subcultural communities, it is vital that the intangible elements, the community's ties, skills and knowledge and perceptions are safeguarded. The ADM community should not just be protected, they should be nurtured and given the right to the continuation of their tangible and intangible heritage in spatial and material terms. Whether the municipal authorities realise it or not the city and its very essence depend upon it.

⁵ Ross, *supra*.

⁶ Ross, *supra*.

⁷ See Tullio Scovazzi, "The Definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage" in Silvia Borelli & Federico Lenzerini, *Cultural Heritage Rights, Cultural Rights, Cultural Diversity: New Developments in International Law* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012) 179 at 180. Scovazzi derives these elements from the practices of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in their creation and maintenance of the lists of intangible cultural heritage that are mandated by the 2003 ICH Convention; Ross, *supra*.